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ABSTRACT

The early education and development of the black child must involve his sense of who he is as a basic component of any services designed for him. This is most effectively achieved by those who care most, are most knowledgeable about his culture, are willing to learn about early human development, and are devoted to adapting all of these to each particular child. Guidelines for black child care and education services include: parental and community control of preschool programs; preschool programs as extensions, not replacements, of family and cultural environment; development and strengthening of the child's self-image; education curricula which will prepare each child with basic skills and a respect for learning; qualified staff to deal with specific needs of black children; inclusion of medical, nutritional, psychological and social services in preschool programs; inclusion of special services for the physically handicapped, emotionally disturbed, or mentally retarded; provisions for safe, positive atmospheres; parental involvement and training; and preschool utilization of other resources of the black community. (LH)

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THE YOUNG BLACK CHILD: HIS EARLY EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT

A Position Paper Prepared for the Educational Policy and Information Center

National Urban League, Inc.

by

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Her publications include, Early Childhood Education, a handbook for teachers and other paraprofessionals in early childhood programs, published 1968; Is the Classroom Still The Child's Domain?, published 1968; A Child's First Reading Teacher: His Parents, published 1970; and Intelligence Is a Way of Behaving, published 1971.

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Caring for children has been a function of the black community since the time of our unwilling arrival in America. Black women have cared for not only their own children but also those of white families, who considered the task menial labor. Our great love for children has been one of the continuing strengths and beauties of black people which stand out in such contrast to the inhumanity consistently demonstrated by white America.

The majority society in this country has expressed only an occasional concern for child-caring services for all young children. The basic assumption seems to be that all mothers can devote as many years as they wish to do nothing but care for their children. Legislation to provide child care centers became necessary in the 1940's (specifically, the Lantham Act) so that mothers could take vital jobs in the defense and war industries. Most of those centers were closed immediately after the war and things got back to normal, back to the assumption that a mother's place was in the home if she had young children.

In the 1960's, the Economic Opportunity Act was another political expedient, although it attempted to address a different issue -- the growing embarassment over discrepancies between white and black school achievement across the nation. Thus came the concept of Headstart: to help impoverished, "culturally and educationally deprived" pre-schoolers prepare themselves for later academic experiences.

And now in the 1970's we once again see child care as an issue, still very much a political football to be tossed from one government agency to another with only a temporary commitment and minimal funding. H.R.I., the Comprehensive Child Development bill, new Headstart programs, the Work Incentive Program — all include child care of some form, all deal directly with the lives

of black people and our youngest generation.

In spite of this latest show of concern, its political nature puts the black community and its children in a very vulnerable position. Decisions about the very lives and futures of our most precious resource -- our children -- are being made through a system of law-making that we have little say in. The laws which are passed continue to demonstrate the inconsistencies and prejudices of this society toward blacks, and will have immeasurable impact on blacks in the near and the distant future.

The Young Child

The earliest years of every child's life -- his formative years -- are unquestionably the most vital to his sound development, education, and overall life chances since these first five years will have tremendous and lasting effects on his entire life. Extensive development takes place in three major areas: physical, social-emotional, and intellectual. Every parent has observed the remarkable changes which take place in an infant over a short period of time as he grows and learns ways of reacting to the world around him. He quickly learns to control his body enough to sit, to reach, to propel himself across a room. He learns who is familiar and who is a stranger. He learns the distinctions between safety and danger, love and isolation, pleasure and pain. The influences of a child's environment during these first five years are nothing less than tremendous on all three developmental processes. Every child must have outside support to meet his basic physical needs, to provide a sense of security and love, and to stimulate his intellectual growth and development. This outside support takes the form of quality child caring methods by his family members, especially the mother or her substitute. Deprivation in any development area will cause severe barriers to the child's becoming a truly healthy adult.

Because of the importance of the early childhood period, added to the reality of a minimal national concern about young children, the black community must be fully committed to the care of its own children. We must never assume that the white community -- whose children we have nurtured and raised -- will ever repay in kind. No one will bear this responsibility for us: we must bear it ourselves.

Black Families

Respect for blackness and concern for black children must have their origins in the home. They begin as the infant is fondled, loved, fed and cared for. They happen through the actions, moods and feelings conveyed by adults on a day-to-day basis. They are transmitted through all the interactions -- both verbal and non-verbal -- that occur between parent and child.

The early development and education of young children cannot be viewed in a vacuum. All that affects a family affects its children. The racism of American institutions reaches its tenticles into every black family and has a profound impact on the context in which a child grows and learns. And yet, black people in this country have survived these centuries of racism by constantly struggling to overcome the oppression and degradation of racist attitudes and systems. Our families continue in spite of, and are perhaps strengthened because of, the external pressures for their destruction since the first day of slavery.

The burgeoning sense of pride in blackness must make its most dramatic impact inside the home and family. Adults who respect themselves are truly able to respect their entire families and the resulting positive feelings influence all interpersonal relations. The tragic results of self-and ethnic-denigration are all too common: a black child grows up in an atmosphere of disrespect, criticism and shame about his blackness and soon becomes a resentful, insecure adult who transmits the same crippling attitudes to the next generation. That positive sense of being "young, gifted and black" must begin within families who are aware of their human potential, their dignity and value which transcend the negative attitudes of society as a whole. One

of the most important aspects of the recent "Black is Beautiful" campaign is the impact it has on the growing environments of our young and beautiful children.

Black families take many forms. Some are "nuclear," with only a parent and child generation included; some are "extended," with several generations or adult relatives included. Some have one adult, some two, some more than two. In some the parents take full responsibility for child rearing; in some it is the grandparents; while in others, an older brother, sister, aunt or cousin bears the responsibility. A child living with someone other than his own parent is not an "adopted" or "foster" child: he is simply a child of that particular family. The growing black child often has several adult role models to experience. His self-image is thus developed through exposure to a variety of adult images regardless of their formal relationship to him.

The important ingredients for a supportive home environment are not determined by the exact shape of a family constellation. They are determined by the ability and opportunity of that family to nurture and protect each child, to instill in him the self-confidence necessary to face a hostile world without succumbing to its violence and hatreds, to help him learn to overcome an educational system which often serves to destroy rather than stimulate the learning process. The importance of family impact on children leads to a necessity for strong supportive services for the whole family. Caring for the family is caring for the child. Where impoverished living conditions threaten the vitality of adults, they threaten the children. Child development/early education programs for black and minority children must embrace community issues which affect family living and opportunities to develop human potential to its maximum.

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Comprehensive child care services must provide not only developmental and educational programs for young children, but also family education programs in matters such as the dangers of lead poisoning, screening for sickle cell anemia, nutrition and health education, job counseling, welfare rights, consumer protection, and other family-related issues. These examples of supportive activities are logical extensions of all child care services. Black people must insist on such comprehensive programs if we sincerely strive to improve the life chances of our children. Head Start and summer recreation programs, innovative day care centers, and Sesame Street all combined will not move us one step toward meeting the real needs of our children unless many other social and educational priorities for the black community are not simultaneously considered.

The Black Community

Black people in America have survived the pressures of minority status and brutal racism through family and community cohesion. The black sense of community can not be demonstrated by charts in City Hall or census maps in Washington. It exists and takes its shape around a common bond for survival within a system which responds to nothing but organized group pressure (economic or political power). Likewise, the boundaries of a community are not defined on paper but by the needs felt by people. No function of the community demonstrates this better than that of child care. In an urban area, one side of a street for one block may constitute the parameters of a child caring community. In a rural area, it may be the ten families within a twenty-mile radius who feel a sense of community.

Part of the growing confidence and determination among black people to direct their own lives is the insistence on community control of social, political, and educational institutions including child care. With impetus from the alleged philosophy of anti-poverty programs to encourage "maximum participation" by community residents, parents in many black communities have learned the techniques and strategies of proposal writing, articulating the needs of their children, addressing law makers, selecting boards of directors, conducting meetings, administering budgets, assuming advocate roles for all families in need, and a multitude of other activities necessary to make existing systems relevant and workable to minority and low income people for a change. In 1970 when the federal Office of Child Development assembled a conference of individuals (professionals and parents) concerned with early education, this emphasis on community control was stated as one of the basic

principles of day care:

> "Therefore, an underlying principle for effective day care and child development programming is policy control, program implementation and operation by the consumers of this service. This control may be exercised either by all of the consumers or at least by a majority of them."
>
> (U.S. Government Printing Office #DHEW-OCD 72-10)

Words are not enough, however. The evolving implementation of policy into programs should be the consequence. It is a well-known fact that decision-makers share their power very reluctantly. In order for black people to have true influence over the care and education of their children, there must be functional mechanisms developed for on-going decision-making to rest with community residents. One or two articulate child advocates will not change an insensitive system of child care. The system itself must allow for parents and community people to participate in the design, implementation, and control the services provided. It must also orient parents to understand and fully utilize their powers. For it is only those who are close to a child, those who have an investment in his future, who will truly defend his right to the best of everything. Through management of child care systems, black people will eventually have a substantial vehicle to 1) determine their own value system, 2) control their own lives, and 3) have a stake in helping their young grow in pride, education and emotional stability and well-being.

Program Content

The struggle for community/parental control over care for young children goes beyond the over-all management of service delivery to children and their families. It very much also includes who will deliver the services and what those services will provide. Community-based programs have laboriously fought for recognition of demonstrated abilities of community residents to staff the child care centers for their children. A primary basis for these special abilities rests in the advantages of similar cultural heritage and life styles. It is legitimate to assume that young black children communicate better with adults with similar ethnicity and life styles -- not only because of mutual understanding of words and phrases, but also because of the respect those adults hold for those children. Many a black adult knows the personal damage done when there is no one around to believe in you or your future. It is this adult who will give such tremendous support to a child who needs to feel that some one has positive expectations about him and his future possibilities.

As stated in the Day Care Principles (mentioned earlier):

> "Progress in harmony with a child's cultural heritage and style are more likely to strengthen his sense of himself .... Respect for ones own culture, values and life styles usually precedes appreciation of those of others."

Strong self-images and racial group identity must be built within young black children. We must increase the number of black adults in this country who have deep pride through knowledge of the rich history of black people across the ages and we must extend this pride to our children. Training programs for adults to work in child care and development centers should have

as a priority black history and culture. In addition, teaching and curriculum techniques for translating these facts for young black children must also be developed. They must help to explode the myths that abound on black people, past and present. The 1970 Black Child Development Education Conference report urges that:

> "staff members should be so informed in Black culture as to automatically transfer any concept into a Black experience for the child... staff training should be a central and regularly scheduled part of the program, and not just a 'second thought' operation...."

For too long in this society, qualifications for teaching the young have systematically excluded minority adults: no one without a formal "union card" -- a teaching certificate -- is considered capable of undertaking a teacher role. Due, to a great extent, to the demonstrated successes of community-based programs which did not follow such rigid guidelines, the Office of Child Development is now moving toward a plan to provide a credential for the "middle professional" level. A new title has been created -- the "Child Development Associate" -- and a process is being designed to recognize and legitimize the on-the-job competencies demonstrated by individuals who are outside the usual patterns of teacher training and are generally overlooked as qualified teachers.

Along with the myths about who is and who is not qualified to teach young children run the myths about how to teach them. There is no area more fraught with "experts" than that of the educational component of programs for young children. Experimental approaches abound throughout the nation. It is vital that in planning for the early education of black children that this be borne in mind: all are experimental. All, (at least in the minds of their developers) are based on some theories which appear to have been

carefully thought through: not all are relevant to the needs of black children.

Every young child has his own unique psychological and physiological developmental design. Each black child has his. Adults who are members of teaching teams must be prepared to note where each child is developmentally and arrange his educational experiences in ways which enable him -- at his unique level -- to relate to these as only he can. The teaching adults must be aware of the fact that the black child will partake of education and living in individual ways. He will grow, will learn, will change and develop into a unique kind of a person. To do this, the program needs to be designed out of the best of all that is available. His teachers need to know examples of all the current educational models; they especially need to know the "why" of each of the models. This is for several reasons, not the least of which is so that they can decide which -- for each child -- has elements that he seems to grasp best. Also, the staff and parents together will be making choices around educational programming; the staff must know in order to interpret with parents what the advantages and disadvantages seem to be for each child of each program. No right is to be more jealously guarded by parents than this one which has to do with the young child's growing into intelligent behavior. Over the first five years, the major impact on his abilities to think for himself, to attack problems, to know who and what kind of person he is, will have been firmly entrenched. He must be helped to know early that he is special, that he alone can define the true limits of his own potential. The educational program must be strong in self-determining aspects. If one educational item or piece of equipment from one model helps him to learn to cope successfully with his growing abilities, he should have it. The teaching staff must know from where to

draw such items and what the advantages are for him as an individual black child. They are obligated to provide the cultural linkage to blackness. The traps of mis-education in subsequent years are anticipated and hopefully avoided by this planned approach to self-image improvement. Black psychologist John Dill's position on ethnic programming is:

> "Logically, the formulation, development, and implementation of any early childhood curriculum must have ethnic programming at its core.... The minority group child needs to participate in and enjoy an educational experience that is defined, designed, and implemented with his ethnicity as the primary factor..... the basic proposition is that we need to adapt the curriculum to the child, instead of the reverse."
>
> (The National Elementary Principal, September 1971, Vol. LI. No. I p. 64)

This speaks to the heart of this paper. The young black child must have his sense of who he is as a basic component of any services designed for his care and education. This is most effectively achieved by those who care most, are most knowledgeable about his culture -- past and present, and most dedicated to a sound future, are willing to learn whatever is know about human development in the early years, and are devoted to adapting all of these to each particular young black child.

Principles for Early Childhood Program

Child care and education services for our communities must above all reflect the positive, creative attitudes we black people increasingly feel about ourselves. To accomplish this, the following criteria will serve as basic guidelines:

1. Pre-school programs must be designed, implemented and controlled by the participating parents and other community residents.

The concerns and needs of a community can only be addressed by those who understand them best -- members of the community. These needs will vary from one area to another and cannot be standardized by outside "experts" who have theories of little relevance to a specific situation. Control of programs goes beyond an informal advisory committee. It means having the authority in a formally constituted governing body to prepare the program's proposal, select the facility's site, design the facility to reflect the educational and cultural values of the community, manage the allocation and expenditure of funds, establish the curriculum components and select the materials, monitor the teaching process, evaluate all program components, and undertake any activities seen as important for meeting the goals set by that governing body.

Parents should constitute the majority of such a body and play active roles in reaching all decisions regarding program operations. Community residents who have professional expertise in areas important to child care -- doctors, dentists, psychologists, nutritionists, lawyers, etc. -- should be invited to share their experience and knowledge with the parents. A system of volunteer and consultant services can involve many concerned residents who understand the true meaning of community.

2. Pre-school programs must serve as an extension -- not a replacement -- of the child's family and cultural environment.

Whatever the outline of a program, it must be based on respect for blackness. This respect is closely linked to respect for black families and their right to function as the primary influence in the lives of their children. A child care program that seeks -- either overtly or unconsciously -- to replace a child's family influences with outside training will first confuse and then destroy the child. The racism and paternalism so frequently demonstrated in education programs must not be perpetuated. No matter what the program goals include, strategies for meeting them must be consistent with the family life styles of the children.

3. Pre-school programs must develop and strengthen the child's self-image of personal identity, dignity and ethnic membership to prepare him for relating positively to the world around him.

Just as a hungry child cannot learn, a child who thinks he has no value, no future cannot learn. Personal confidence and pride do not come wrapped in a high school diploma: they are created or destroyed long before a child reaches his tenth birthday. A young black child who is surrounded by negative attitudes about him, his family, or his ethnic group, is bound to suffer from a diminished view of himself and his own worth, and will lose all enthusiasm for learning. We must not allow this to happen. We must make sure that each child of the program knows that he is an important human being who has the strength to relate to a world which will often treat him otherwise.

4. Pre-school programs must include an education curriculum to prepare each child with the basic skills and a respect for learning he will need throughout his life.

Important as self-confidence and pride are, skills are also crucial. No child should move into a first grade setting without preparation for reading, arithmetic, language skills, writing and logic. Because of the deficiencies of many urban elementary school systems, it is especially important that urban black children have solid foundation skills before entering those schools. We cannot

afford to devote the pre-school years of our children to recreation or arts and crafts. Their intellectual development is too valuable, valuable to themselves and to the community as a whole. As black people strive toward institution-building, our young must be prepared to make their contributions.

5. Pre-school programs must have qualified staff who are capable of understanding the specific needs of black children and designing a curriculum to meet those needs.

Every child learns and grows in his own distinct way. This is particularly true of very young children, who have not yet been exposed to the regimentation often found in public schools. A pre-school teacher must therefore be required to have a great capacity for individualized and creative teaching to teach each child according to his specific situation. The teaching methods and curriculum to be used with black children must be specifically relevant to those particular children. Staff members selected from the community are uniquely qualified to understand the needs and life styles of the children in a child care program and should have the highest priority for filling jobs. However, all staff must be given on-going training in how to relate to the children, to appreciate their needs, and to carry out daily activities for them.

6. Pre-school programs must include medical, nutrition, psychological and social services along with the educational.

A program of education will have severely limited success if all of these essential services are not included. Programs must be comprehensive: they must see the child as a whole being, who needs good health, food, emotional support and a variety of other human supports in order to function in a learning situation. Child care centers for black children must provide a medical and dental examination when a child is admitted and on-going observations. Nutritious foods must be prepared for daily meals and snacks. Children who demonstrate emotional or family problems should have special services whenever those problems occur. Supplementary services should be available for whatever needs the participating children have. A system of referrals should be arranged with other agencies to meet needs the program itself cannot meet.

7. Pre-school programs must include services to children with special needs, such as the physically handicapped, emotionally disturbed or mentally retarded.

The community must strive to serve all its children regardless of superficial labels and distinctions. Through special programming and counseling, families of children with various handicaps which are not on an extreme level must be included in the services of a child care program. The children should have special activities through a flexible, individualized curriculum that will improve their abilities to learn and function in normal settings. The families of the handicapped children should

receive counseling to help them cope better with the handicapping conditions. If special therapy is needed, the families should also be referred to other agencies or professionals.

8. Pre-school programs must provide a safe, positive, caring atmposhere for children.

A physical environment can either help or hinder learning. The appearance of the building or classrooms, the pictures on the wall, the arrangement of chairs and equipment, the colors, the brightness, etc. -- all contribute to a sense of respect and security for the children who come to the facility every day. Children and their families can easily perceive the attitudes which staff have toward them by how the surroundings look. Even with a modest budget, a learning environment can be well-kept and stimulating.

In addition, standards of safety must be observed; children must be protected from physical dangers and accidents. The center is their "home away from home" and it must be maintained with loving care.

9. Pre-school programs must include parent involvement and training so that the learning process will carry over into the home.

One of the beauties of the early education process is its totality. Everything a young child does has learning involved, from riding a tricycle to looking at a magazine to putting on

his clothes. There are no sharp lines of distinction between home and school, between work and play, between parent and teacher. The home must be an extension of the child care program, as well as vice versa. Parents must be encouraged and taught how to stimulate learning in the home by using everyday activities and articles. In this age of television, too many children are not urged to utilize their learning creativity outside of a school setting. An important aspect of educating a child is educating the adults closest to him to support the learning process.

10. Pre-school programs must utilize other resources of the black community in their development and operation.

All programs depend on people other than direct staff and administrators. They often include architects, lawyers, builders, kitchen service, laundry service, repair service, etc. Many of these components can be arranged through community residents or purchased from community businesses. The strength of an entire community can be increased through such operation.

* * *

It would be naive wishful thinking to assume that all early childhood programs in all black and low income communities can fully include each of these ten principles. However, we must constantly strive for excellence. Our children deserve the very best we can offer.

> "If we are not for ourselves, who will be for us? And if we are for ourselves alone, what kind of people are we? If not now, when?
>
> Maya Angelou, I Know Whey The Caged Bird Sings

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